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SUBJECT: ASO AND MEDVEDEV DISCUSS NORTHERN TERRITORIES

Classified By: Ambassador J. Thomas Schieffer per 1.4 (B) (D)

11. (C) Summary. Japan PM Aso expressed concern with the pace of working-level discussions on the Northern Territories during talks with Russian President Dmitry Medvedev on the margins of the November 22-23 APEC Summit in Lima, Peru. Medvedev said a solution would require strong political will by leaders on both sides, and he promised not to delay resolution until the "next generation." MOFA officials feel confident about Medvedev's commitment to resolve the issue, but claim lower-level officials are not adequately informing the President. Tokyo and Moscow plan additional talks on the disputed islands during a DFM-level meeting which will prepare for Prime Minister Putin's Tokyo visit, which both sides agree should take place in early 2009. End Summary.

12. (C) On December 4, MOFA Russia Division Principal Deputy Director Kotaro Otsuki briefed Embassy Tokyo on Prime Minister Taro Aso's November 22 meeting with Russian President Dmitry Medvedev, held on the margins of the November 22-23 APEC Summit in Lima, Peru. Their one-hour dialogue, which Otsuki characterized as "very frank" and "straight-forward," focused primarily on the Northern Territories (NT), but ended with a brief discussion on North Korea. FM Sergey Lavrov accompanied President Medvedev.

Northern Territories

13. (C) The Prime Minister observed to Medvedev that, during the period he served as Foreign Minister in PM Shintaro Abe's Cabinet, the Tokyo-Moscow economic relationship had greatly expanded, but that talks on the NT had not advanced as quickly. According to Otsuki, Aso expressed interest in concluding a Japan-Russia peace treaty for the purpose of resolving the NT situation. The PM noted his agreement with views expressed by Medvedev to former PM Yasuo Fukuda on the margins of the July 2008 Lake Toya G-8 Summit, in which both sides agreed not to shelve the issue and to push for "the settlement of the issue at the earliest date in order to normalize bilateral relations completely." Aso said, however, Medvedev's "decisive leadership had not yet affected the working-level negotiations," and that there was a "need to break down the mentality of bureaucrats," Otsuki reported.

14. (C) Medvedev responded, according to Otsuki, "the issue would not be postponed to the next generation." Noting bureaucratic resistance existed in all countries, the President stated "the important thing is for leaders to have political will. If leaders have such will, they will solve the problem." Medvedev, Otsuki continued, opined the solution to the NT issue should be based on the documents which we have agreed to so far. (Note: Otsuki said Medvedev was referring to the 1956 Joint Declaration, 1993 Tokyo Declaration, 2001 Irkutsk Statement, 2003 Action Plan, and other agreements.)

Medvedev Not Well-Informed

15. (C) Japanese officials remain confident Medvedev has the will to resolve the NT problem and is eager to address the issue, Otsuki stated. He observed, however, the Russian President did not appear have been receiving good information on the working-level talks and did not appear to be well informed. Otsuki also confirmed a November 24 Sankei Shimbun On-line story reporting on Aso's exchange with the Russian President regarding the NT. According to Sankei, when the PM noted that Japan's Foreign Ministry had been expressing irritation at the stagnation of discussions at the working level, Medvedev turned to FM Lavrov and others and said, "So it is your fault then," which provoked a "great burst of laughter."

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Putin Visit

16. (C) Tokyo and Moscow plan to hold additional talks on the NT during a Deputy Foreign Minister-level meeting to prepare for Prime Minister Vladimir Putin's visit to Japan, now scheduled to take place in early 2009. President Medvedev's Chief of Staff, Sergey Naryshkin, will also visit December 9-10.

North Korea

17. (C) During brief talks on the DPRK, both sides agreed on the importance of a denuclearized North Korea and documenting an effective verification regime.
SCHIEFFER